

# Teacher-led professional growth through Lesson Study

The growing North American emphasis on standards and accountability has led many jurisdictions to rely on externally developed measures like standardized tests as the sole measure of student learning and school effectiveness.

A few parents and community members see these externally imposed measures as intrusive and wasteful, but the great majority accept them as essential to ensuring that students are learning and that teachers possess the knowledge and skills to carry out their professional responsibilities.

Against this backdrop of calls for increased accountability, and the need for classroom teachers to maintain a solid understanding of best practices, the classroom teacher carries on, too often working in isolation.

**Whether we choose to acknowledge the fact, or not, our current culture of teaching and learning is isolationist in nature. Teachers generally operate within the confines of their own classroom, not certain how or when it is appropriate to share.**

Studies examining issues around the retention of new teachers inform us that one of the main reasons our newer colleagues abandon teaching early in their careers is that feeling of being alone, without a process to connect with experienced peers who are willing to share their knowledge and expertise (Ontario College of Teachers, 2003).

In their study of American, German, and Japanese education practices, two American researchers identified the isolation and the lack of purposeful professional dialogue for most American educators as one of the key differences between American and Japanese teaching cultures. In their 1999 book, *The Teaching Gap*, James Heibert and James Stigler probed some of the reasons for the gap between

relatively high-achieving Japanese students and their American counterparts.

One of their key findings was that American teachers typically planned, taught, and assessed their student's learning experiences in isolation. In contrast Japanese teachers generally carried out their work in rich, trust-based collaborative learning environments. Japanese teachers see themselves as leading "self-directed professional lives" where they design and define their own school-based professional learning through a collaborative process called Lesson Study.

Lesson Study is a professional learning structure that seems simple, almost to the point of the ridiculous. A small team of classroom teachers (ideally four to six) collaborate to plan a specific learning activity. One member of the team volunteers to teach the lesson while the other team members observe and record the student responses to the elements of the lesson. After the lesson is completed, the team of teachers re-assemble to share their observations and use these to revise the lesson.

Dr. Catherine Lewis, of California's Mills College, is an expert in Lesson Study research who believes that this method offers teachers a powerful professional learning process, one that values teachers and allows them to conduct authentic professional research within their own schools and classrooms. Lewis (2002) writes:

**"Lesson Study recognizes the central importance and difficulty of teaching – of actually bringing to life standards, frameworks and 'best practices' in the classroom."**



Left to right: Back Row: Sharon Schlesinger, Sara Garnick, Jane Paterson, Deb Sinyard Middle Row: Sandra Fraser, Brian Harrison, Diane Muckleston Front Row: Arlene Higgins-Wright, Leigh Benninger, Lori Drawetz, Penny Zielinski. From furthest to nearest in frame: Penny Zielinski, Leigh Benninger, Arlene Higgins-Wright, Sandra Fraser

The curiosity about Lesson Study as the predominant model of professional development in Japan, and its growing popularity in the United States, prompted the Literacy Curriculum Team (all either ETFO or OSSTF members) in York Region to carry out a trial of Lesson Study.

Over the winter of 2004, the team facilitated Lesson Study groups for over 280 ETFO members as part of the Ministry of Education's Early Reading and Early Math Strategy Training initiatives.

The team divided the participating primary teachers up by grades within their geographical family of schools, resulting in teams that ranged in size from 8 to 12 teachers. Each group was given the support of a curriculum team member as a group facilitator. They identified the protocols the team would follow, set a social and academic goal for the research lesson, planned the research lesson, observed it being taught, and debriefed the experience for revision purposes.

For both the Early Math and Early Reading Lesson Study groups, the academic focus was based upon the program recommendations in the Expert Panel Reports released by the Ministry of Education and Training in the spring of 2003 (ETFO Provincial Staff Officer Ruth Dawson served as chair of the Math Expert Panel).

**Initially teachers were concerned about having peers observe and assess each other's work. One of the central tenets of Lesson Study is that it is a collaboratively planned lesson—a group effort—in which the focus of observation is the students, not the teacher delivering the lesson.**

The facilitators continually reinforced this notion. The planning process involved a great deal of trust building, including setting protocols on how to dialogue and how to express disagreement.

Participants, many of whom were initially sceptical, offered feedback that was frank and mostly positive. A common theme was their appreciation of the rich dialogue that occurred during lesson planning. Teachers found these discussions to be deep and highly relevant to their everyday teaching, in spite of the fact they were really discussing only one lesson. Additionally, team members found that the opportunity to observe students learning, without the responsibilities of teaching the research lesson, was surprisingly rewarding and powerful. As Japanese educator Kyouichi Itoh states, Lesson Study provides teachers with the chance to, "develop the eyes to see children."

Ann Marie Marshall, an ETFO York Region member, was one of the pioneers in this process, volunteering to teach one of the first research lessons in her kindergarten classroom. She notes that "listening to the observations of my peers after I had taught the lesson helped me to more clearly understand how students reacted to the instructional strategies and materials I was using, and I was able to hear suggestions on how I could better address these needs."

Lesson Study provided York Region teachers with a framework for discussing the many factors that make up their daily professional lives. Topics such as diverse student needs, evolving curriculum interpretations, and the challenges of effective assessment and instruction became part of every planning session. Many teams developed a climate of engaged but playful collegiality as the participants formed professional relationships based on trust and on the common classroom experiences.

The core of the Lesson Study process, however, is the data collection carried out during the teaching of the lesson. It is this research focus—planning the learning strategies, predicting student response, and analysing the actual observed student responses—that generates the dialogue that changes teacher practice.

*"So far, one country stands out for resisting the practice of mandatory student and teacher testing. Its teachers have refused to participate in either because of the limitations of these measures. Curiously enough, there has been little public outcry for mass testing or for the imposition of mandatory measures to enforce teacher competency."*

Rather than the remote crunching of student test scores and subsequent layering in of socio-economic factors, Lesson Study is data collection carried out by teachers who are able to consider the profile of real children and act upon the implications of this data in a direct and meaningful way.

Stigler and Heibert refer to this as the act of making teaching "visible". By having the team members observe each student's reaction to the lesson, the lesson actually "slows down" to the point where each action is observable and open to discussion after the lesson. This process is far from the current prevailing methods of collecting educational data: standardized tests and university faculty research. In both cases, there are critical barriers in incorporating findings into actual classroom practice since classroom teachers have had only a limited involvement.

There are some obstacles that would limit the spread of Lesson Study as a model for effective, teacher-led professional development. A key barrier is time. Generous subsidies to release participating teachers were attached to the Early Math and Reading Strategies. Clearly, the current funding and staffing models are not structured to allow all teachers equal access to a Lesson Study cycle.

*The time given to meet during the school day to learn with their colleagues was critical. As one teacher noted, "For the first time in my 10 years of teaching, I've been able to meet and talk about teaching with my peers. I feel like a professional."*

The essential element to the success of the process was that participants had the time and facilitated support to build the trust that in turn allowed them to share their questions and their flaws with others. Many found that they shared common fears but also a great diversity of strengths.

The York Region teachers' experience suggests that Lesson Study could provide a protocol by which individual teachers could share their knowledge and gain from the wisdom of

others while they, too, craft and re-craft their professional knowledge base. In Japan, research lessons are routinely published and available for purchase in bookstores. This level of transparency is evident in the climate of trust that is typical in teacher, student, and parent interactions in Japan.

Our teachers in York Region became keenly aware of the benefits of collaboration through Lesson Study. They understood how they could address equity issues for exceptional and second-language learners. They were able to reflect on the choices they made around assessment tools, instructional strategies and use of materials. They were able to enjoy simply watching children working at learning, and talking about it with other teachers.

The simplicity of Japanese lesson studies can be instructive as ETFO seeks out ideas and innovations to further develop our policies in the area of teacher-led professional growth. Focusing teacher learning on observations of student learning and creating the climate where teachers can benefit from each other's shared expertise through the careful study of our teaching practices is one way for us to gradually take ownership for our professional learning in our classrooms and schools.

The current Canadian obsession with standardized testing to ensure teacher ability and student learning is not unique. Many developed nations are employing the same measures, to varying degrees.

So far, one country stands out for resisting the practice of mandatory student and teacher testing. Its teachers have refused to participate in either because of the limitations of these measures. Curiously enough, there has been little public outcry for mass testing or for the imposition of mandatory measures to enforce teacher competency. The name of this country? Japan.

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